Distance Inservice Training for Language Teachers: A Suggested Approach

By Roger C. G. Barnard

It must be emphasized at the outset that these thoughts are concerned with post-experience professional development-that is, in-service training, rather than pre-service, or initial teacher training. The ideas discussed below derive from programs I have run in Ministries of Education in Europe and the Middle East, and they have proved to be effective, practicable, and popular with the teachers.

Rationale for Distance Training

Training teachers at a distance has superficial attractions to those who wish to carry out a financially viable program of professional development for teachers. In the first place, in a distance program it is not necessary to collect teachers together in one place all at the same time, but rather it is expected that they work on their own-and usually in their own time. This saves money on accommodation and travel, as well as any costs (e.g. for substitution) that may be incurred in taking teachers out of their schools. Secondly, it is not necessary to pay the costs for a trainer to be present at training sessions, nor does a room have to be provided. Even the provision of teaching equipment (e.g. videoplayers) can often be left to the teachers.

However, it is unwise to consider distance training to be a *cheap* alternative to more conventional programs. Rather, distance-training may be an efficient means of achieving some training goals in certain circumstances. For example, in many countries teachers work in schools a long way from the capital and often remote from each other; it might be practically impossible to get together those teachers targeted for training for conventional courses, even if time and money were available. A distance course may be the only way to train teachers in those parts of the country that other courses cannot reach.

More positively, distance training lends itself to reflective and experiential learning. By reflective is meant the teacher's conscious harnessing of existing conceptual schemata or mental constructs to new information. By experiential is meant a learning situation in which new knowledge can soon be put to practical application and the results evaluated, at least tentatively.

Furthermore, distance training lends itself to self-pacing: the trainee learns in his or her own time, and at a rate which broadly meets individual needs. Apart from suiting personal convenience, this should facilitate the development of a sense of self-reliance, which itself should be an underlying goal of any program of professional development.

It should, however, be noted that since teaching is above all an interpersonal activity, wherever possible some face-to-face contact should be built into any training program. Such direct contact

with colleagues is very important, as it will facilitate the exchange of learning among peers. The costs and benefits involved in such meetings should be carefully weighed.

The five-stage approach, outlined below, is suggested as the basis for a set of units, each of which would focus on a specific didactic point. Each unit would consist of a set of printed material and videoed lesson extracts. The range of topics that can usefully be dealt with in such units includes:

- beginning and ending lessons appropriately
- the purpose of revision and appropriate techniques
- presentation of items of vocabulary, grammar, etc.
- modeling and practicing pronunciation/intonation
- dealing with errors and/or correction techniques
- approaches to the teaching of specific reading or listening skills
- organizing pair or group work
- encouraging communication among learners
- making teacher-talk more effective
- considering aspects of the teacher's body language
- the analysis of effective classroom interaction
- giving practice for tests and examinations.
- The content and number of units in any program will depend,

Of course, on the particular circumstances in which the training takes place and the purposes it is intended to serve. However, the broad assumption is that the teachers cumulatively gain unit credits for work done on the course.

This outline also lends itself to the provision of core and peripheral units, from which the teachers can make choices according to their own perceived needs and interests.

Starting with the Teacher

Teacher training (as opposed perhaps to the broader concept of teacher education) should focus its attention on classroom practice, and should have as its primary goal the improvement of the teacher's practical efforts to bring about effective learning on the part of his/her students. However, this behavioral focus should not mean that there should be a lack of theory in a training program. Any change in professional behavior should come about as a result of realignments in the teacher's attitude, and these changes of attitude themselves should derive from increased professional knowledge-otherwise, behavioral changes are either capricious or the result of conditioning. Adding to one's professional knowledge is not a simple matter of absorbing unrelated bits of information, but rather of integrating new data into a coherent mental scheme. It is in this sense that theory must play a major role in any training course. Thus, theoretical reflection-the internalization of relevant knowledge-may bring about changes in attitudes, which in turn may give rise to changes in behavior. In any training course, it may be

possible to specify behavioral changes, but it is less easy to predetermine changes in attitudes-and certainly it is less desirable in a democratic system. Therefore, the teacher needs to be put at the heart of the training process, and both the trainer and the teacher need to understand that the sole agent of effective behavioral improvement is the teacher him- herself, and his or her attitude to any proposed change is critical.

It is axiomatic in any teaching situation that it is just as important to build on the strengths of the learners as to address their perceived needs, which are often too easily regarded as merely weaknesses. Where teachers are being trained at a distance, particular problems are posed in establishing these relative qualities. Much can be done by employing appropriately-designed, introspective questionnaires evoking the teachers' awareness, knowledge, experience, and skills in specific areas; but these should be further explored by interviews, preferably face-to-face but otherwise mediated (e.g. by telephone or by correspondence).

In addition to these intangible strengths and weaknesses, each teacher should be made aware of the tangible learning resources available to him or her. For example, he/she should draw up a resource list of all relevant books and periodicals at home, and the accessibility of audio and video cassettes/recorders, and other technical facilities, such as perhaps computer applications. The teacher should note the availability of relevant mass media in the locality-radio and TV programs, book shops, libraries, etc. It is also worth making a note of potentially useful resource people, such as colleagues, family members, and ex-students; these people can be very supportive in the distant days ahead. Finally, it is a good idea to encourage the distance trainees to consider their present lifestyle with a view to identifying the most appropriate times to set aside for personal study, as well as other adjustments that need to be made. This might lead to the teachers keeping a training diary, in which the times and topics of study are noted-including specific points of interest or difficulty.

It is extremely desirable, at this early stage, to enable and encourage teachers who may follow the same distance course to contact each other. They should be asked if they are willing to exchange addresses and/or telephone numbers, and in the latter case to suggest optimal contact times. It might also be appropriate to ask the trainees to indicate on the questionnaires which specific points they would like to discuss with colleagues, and then arrange contact times (direct, or mediated by telephone or correspondence) between or among themselves.

While the trainer should gain information from this process, the primary focus in this introductory phase is on the teacher's own self-knowledge and the self-confidence this should engender. If the teacher begins with a feeling of low esteem arising from a sense of deficit, the success of any training program is jeopardized; this is particularly true in the case of distance learning, where the trainee is largely on his or her own.

As an integral part of the above process, the teachers should be consulted about the aims, content, and methods of the course and also how their progress through the course will be evaluated. Wherever possible, changes should be made as a result of their suggestions, as well as making the course more relevant to the particular teachers, thereby enhancing the validity of the course. This positive response will increase the teachers' investment in, and commitment to, the

program. The sense of "ownership" thus developed will help to offset the inevitable loneliness of the long-distance trainee.

Articulating a Distance Training Course

Stage 1: Orientation. For each topic there should be a set of print materials to introduce ideas, some or many of which will be new to the teacher. The extent of this theoretical introduction will vary according to the depth of knowledge required, the assumed or known level of existing knowledge, considerations of the teacher's study time available and, lastly but not least, financial constraints.

These print materials should be carefully designed to be attractive to read. If possible, there should be accompanying illustrations to satisfy both didactic and aesthetic criteria.

The printed texts should be accompanied by short but relevant tasks to be completed before the next stage. The purpose of these tasks is to stimulate the teacher's interest in the topic, and to integrate the new ideas into his/her existing knowledge and awareness of problem areas and previous experience of dealing with similar situations. When the tasks have been completed, the teacher should insert them, together with the printed tests, in the appropriate place in his/her course file.

Each teacher following the course should be encouraged to contact others to discuss and compare their responses to the tasks.

Stage 2: transfer. This stage is based around a video recording, lasting perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, containing extracts from one or more lessons. These clips would illustrate techniques related to the topic discussed in the print materials of the previous stage. They should be considered as mirrors of reasonable practice, rather than models for direct emulation. With some topics-such as the specification of course objectives, lesson planning, criteria for assessing learners' progress, and the writing and scoring of tests-this transfer stage might be achieved via the medium of print. However, since much of the training is concerned with classroom practice, the axiom that a picture tells a thousand words holds good.

The video should be accompanied by printed tasks to be carried out by the teacher before, and while, viewing.

Previewing tasks should follow a brief description of the classroom context to be viewed, and ask the teacher to make notes of what he or she might do in the same situation, to anticipate specific difficulties that may arise, or suggest possible solutions for them. The teacher should be encouraged to reflect upon specific experiences with similar situations. For example, "Note down the last time you were in a situation like this. Make notes about what you did, and/or why do you think the learners did." These notes should be retained.

While-viewing tasks are of two sorts, and each requires a separate viewing of the extract. In other words, each lesson extract should be seen at least twice; it is not necessary for the two viewings to take place in the same session.

The first viewing should be to focus attention on what actually happens in the extract-to sharpen the teacher's observation skills. To achieve this, the teacher should be asked to focus on one or two specific items, and record them on a grid, table, form, etc. Thus the teacher will note matters such as:

- what the teacher says
- what the teacher does
- what the learners say (the whole group)
- what the learners do in the context of the specific topic under consideration.

It is a good idea for the teacher to write a short summary of the observation and neatly store this report and the accompanying raw data in the teacher's course file.

The second type of *while-viewing* task is intended to develop the teacher's critical faculties. Therefore, after further reflection of the data gained in the observation tasks, the extract would be viewed a second (or third) time. The tasks this time would consist typically of two or three questions beginning with "How?" or "Why?" While watching the video, the teacher would make brief notes, which he/she would subsequently draft into a short lesson report, to be inserted in his or her course file. It may be pointed out that it is not easy to make notes while viewing a video, but the teacher should be encouraged to do so, even if it means watching the extract more than once; notes written after a lesson tend to be less reliable than those done at the time.

Stage 3: Activation. In this stage, the teacher integrates the ideas generated in stages 1 and 2 by planning classroom tasks or activities for his or her own learners. Before doing so, the teacher would need to consider carefully whether the previously introduced ideas and the techniques demonstrated in the video were really appropriate to his or her own teaching situation; if so, what adaptations would need to be made. This review is particularly relevant to the adoption of demonstrated techniques, since the circumstances of the video lesson will be different from the teacher's, e.g. in terms of the specific content of the lesson, the personality of the teacher, the age, number and nationality of learners, and even perhaps the language taught.

The plan should be based upon what is understood to be sound professional practice within the context in which the teacher works. In other words, the activation plan should not require a format different from a normal lesson plan nor significantly more detail, but should rather enable the pedagogic topic of the training unit to be put clearly in focus.

While the *transfer* and *activation* stages should be designed for teachers to work on their own, it is extremely desirable for those undergoing distance training to be asked to form study groups of two to four people. They could then work through the tasks together, pooling their ideas, experience and skills-and discussing any difficulties that arise. If it is not possible for them to meet, they could be asked to circulate notes among themselves. It should be clearly

acknowledged that the real expertise lies precisely among the teachers rather than with the (distanced!) trainer. This networking of teachers is important not only for study purposes, but also for emotional and psychological support.

Stage 4: Application. The teacher applies the above plan to one or more groups of his or her own learners in the genuine learning context. This is the *vital stage* of the training process, the pivot on which all else hinges; without application, there is no training.

The application stage should be monitored, and this can be done in a number of ways. Perhaps the best way is for a fellow teacher to be invited to observe (part of) a lesson and make notes based on agreed criteria; these could be amicably discussed afterwards. (If the observer is also a colleague in the course, skills of classroom observation and critical awareness are thus reinforced.) However, in certain circumstances this suggestion may not be practicable or acceptable. Alternatively, therefore, the monitoring could be done by the teacher audio recording his/her own lesson and then analyzing (part of) it with appropriate observation and/or evaluation criteria.

Stage 5: Evaluation. The application stage needs to be evaluated using appropriate criteria, and the findings noted-perhaps in a report, or a questionnaire (self-devised?) or an entry in a training diary. This written record should be filed with the work done during the other stages.

The criteria used to evaluate the application stage will vary from topic-to-topic; some will focus on the teacher's language or activities, others on the learners. But they will also change according to progress through the training program. Initially, it may be assumed that teachers need simple and straightforward guidance in self-(or peer) evaluation; with experience, they should become more technically proficient and creative. Thus the instructions for self-evaluation should tend to be less directive and more suggestive as the course progresses.

The evaluation of the application stage-although valuable as an integral element of any course of professional development-is only one part of the evaluation process.

Reference was made above to the need for the trainees to maintain course files containing notes, reports, etc., made at the different stages in any unit. The trainees should be encouraged to supplement these records of formal learning with notes of their emotional and psychological reactions at the time. The importance of this written record of cognitive and affective development cannot be overemphasized. In the first place, it is an ongoing record of the trainee's own progress during the course that will permit a personal evaluation to be made. This is extremely important in the absence of an on-hand trainer or course tutor to provide immediate feedback. Such reference becomes even more valuable on those occasions when the distance trainee is discouraged and motivation flags; confirmation of the distance already traveled can stimulate further effort. The course files should also, of course, be useful reference points for the teacher for a long time after the course has been completed.

In the second place, if the trainer wishes to monitor the trainees' progress, they could be requested to complete and return feedback sheets or assignments after stages 2, 3, or 5. This work would be completed by the trainee with reference to his or her own written record.

Feedback of this sort is particularly important if the trainees are to be formally assessed in terms of achievement of specified course objectives.

Thirdly, the trainees' written records are vital in the evaluation of the course itself. During the program, as well as at the end, the trainer should seek feedback from the teachers on the extent of the relevance and effectiveness of the materials and the modality of training. This may be done partly by means of questionnaires, and the teachers' written notes, neatly organized, will greatly help them provide detailed feedback.

The Costs of Distance Training

The above suggestions are practicable: the author has developed the basic pattern over time in various contexts. However, although effective, this approach to teacher development is not necessarily cheap.

Distance training requires that most resources are needed at the front end of the program-i.e. the setting up of the course, rather than its ongoing operation, although the running costs should not be discounted . It will be appreciated that the main costs of preparing a course as outlined above do not vary with the number of people who follow the course: the design and preparation of print and video materials are the same for fifty or five-hundred teachers. (The reproduction of these materials is relatively cheap.) Major expense is incurred in the production of video materials, but the most obvious alternative-demonstration lessons in different training locations by the trainer or fellow trainees-is likely to be even more expensive. Furthermore, once recorded, the materials can be used again, and may also be reedited in a variety of ways. Experience indicates that three or four recorded lessons can provide clips to illustrate many different aspects of teaching. It is possible, too, to use commercially available materials, such as the British Council's *Teaching* and *Learning* in *Focus* series, but of course permission for their use in this context would need to be sought and probably a fee paid.

The cost of the *efficient* distribution of course materials needs to be taken into account, although in many cases this can be done piggyback on the existing infrastructure. Where, for example, the postal system is unreliable, materials can be sent to regional centers through regular administrative channels, and trainees can collect them (or ask for them to be collected by colleagues, head teachers, inspectors, etc.) on their periodic visits to the centers for other purposes. What is fundamentally important is that the materials are received by the trainees in good time, and that any feedback from them is promptly attended to and equally promptly acknowledged. Nothing is more disheartening to the distance trainee than the feeling that no one is paying attention at the other end!

Mention has been made of the importance of arranging face-to-face contact with, and among, trainees during the course. It is very useful for the course organizer (as well as the course designers, if they are not one and the same) to meet the trainees to establish and maintain personal rapport, to explain any points of difficulty, and to receive feedback. If teachers are also to be encouraged to meet others following the course, there needs to be appropriate provision,

and recompense (not necessarily financial), for their efforts in this area. The cost of all such meetings has to be calculated, monitored and, if possible, measured in terms of their effectiveness.

The evaluation of distance training will incur similar costs to other training programs, but the *reliability* of *evaluation at a distance* has to be carefully considered. If, for example, the trainees' evaluation of the course can only be achieved by the completion of a questionnaire, much care needs to be put into the formulation of questions, and the quantity and quality of the responses carefully weighed. Furthermore, if it is deemed necessary for trainees to undertake formal tests or examinations-and this may be unavoidable-it is unlikely that this can be done at a distance. The cost implications of these points need to be weighed.

Conclusion

By using the ideas suggested above the author has found that some important areas of professional development can be undertaken at a distance quite cost-effectively. When planning any distance course, it is necessary to place the teachers concerned at the forefront with the understanding that they themselves are the sole agents of whatever changes in classroom performance may result. The teachers themselves need to be sensitized to the demands and opportunities that training at a distance involves, and the many resources that they can bring to the program. The materials and procedures need to be tailored to the teachers' strengths and needs, and wherever possible modified in response to feedback about particular circumstances. This requires caring and prompt attention throughout the course. Finally, the organization responsible for training teachers at a distance needs to be constantly aware of the heavy investment of time, effort and emotion that is made by the distance trainee.

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